

HUMOR AND INVECTIVE IN EARLY TUDOR POLEMIC PROSE

“THE ART of prose,” wrote G. P. Krapp forty years ago in a book distinguished alike for its provocativeness and its wrong-headedness, “begins with the effort to adapt language to useful ends, to find some means of communication whereby men may inform or persuade each other in the thousand and one complications of everyday life.”¹ This paper tries to isolate one particular note from the babel of attempts at persuasion during the early years of the English Reformation, and to submit that as a literary phenomenon it was neither transient, nor negligible in its effects. This element is the use of humor—homely, racy, street-corner humor—either as a component of invective, or for its own sake. On the one hand this technique may be represented in analogy or simple expression indistinguishable to all intents from the language of common speech and folklore; at another extreme it may degenerate into the most calculated scurrility. I suggest, however, that the habit persisted in writings not patterned for controversy: persisted as an element in prose that begins to acquire manners, though not mannerisms—that is, prose that is polite but remains distinctively and natively English, partly through the vigor that this habit imparted.

The reason for choosing to consider the prose of religious controversy is obvious; it was a subject about which writers cared enough to try to be completely clear, at whatever cost to elegance, a contest they wanted to win badly enough to bar no holds. There is additional reason for limiting the survey to the early years of the English Reformation: study of classical models had not yet exerted a shaping influence

upon English prose, so that it should be possible to say whether a particular stylistic device is in the English tradition or in that of Roman rhetoric. Later, as Francis Bacon pointed out, ". . . men began to hunt more after words than matter; and more after the choiceness of the phrase, and the round and clean composition of the sentence, and the sweet falling of the clauses, and the varying and illustration of their words with tropes and figures, than after the weight of the matter. . . . Then did Car of Cambridge, and Ascham, with their lectures and writings, almost deify Cicero and Demosthenes. . . ."²

This time relationship is important, because of all the devices of the rhetors, the one that contributed most to the grand aberration of English prose style in the last quarter of the century, euphuism, was paromoeon, or alliteration. But alliteration was already at home in English prose, had, in fact, a long history of sealed partnership with the English language.³ And it was one of the principal vehicles of the native style we are considering.

A single volume of Sir Thomas More's illustrates this point well. "For lesse harme were it yf onely they that are all redy by myred, were as the scrypture sayth myrd on more & more, thanne that they sholde caste theyr dyrt abrode vpon other folkes clene clothys." There is also the simile of the fire of heresy, which, says More, is "yet neuer after so well & clerely quenched, but that it lyeth lurkyng stylly in some olde rotten tymber vnder cellers & celynges, that yf it be not wel wayted on and marked, wyll not fayle at lengthe to fall on an open fyre agayne. . . ." Finally, we may point to a single insult offered to John Frith: ". . . I wold not gyue the paryng of a pere for his prayour though it were better than it is. . . ."⁴

Tyndale was good at this sort of thing too, though he did not pursue the sound with the same pertinacity as More.

"And of prayer," he writes in one place, "we thynke/ that no man can praye but at church/ and that it is nothinge else but to saye pater noster vnto a post." Again, Tyndale says, "But yt ys a ferre other thyng that payneth them and byteth them by the brestes. . . . The losse of those iuglinge termes ys the mater where of all these bottes brede/ that gnawe them by the belies and make them so vnquiet."⁵

Alliteration occasionally lent added color to the vituperation of Simon Fish, too; he wrote, for example, "O howe all the substaunce of your Realme forthwith your swerde, power, crowne, dignite, and obedience of your people, rynneth hedlong ynto the insaciabill whyrlepole of these gredi goulafres to be swallowed and deuoured." Tyndale, once at least, indulged himself with an end rhyme as well: "Yf they will not lat the laye man have the worde of God in his mother tonge/ yet let the prestes have it/ which for a greate parte of them doo vnderstonde no latine at all: but synge & saye and patter all daye/ with the lyppes only/ that which the herte vnderstondeth not."⁶

Sometimes the thing that contributes the essence of what C. S. Lewis calls the "race and pith and mere Englishry" of this prose is nothing more than the language of proverb and the diction of slang and dialect. ". . . I haue as you se so well auoyded his gynnys and his grinnes and all his trym-trams, that he hathe not yet trayned me into no trappe of myne owne, as you se him solempnely boste. . . ." Simon Fish recommends setting "these sturdy lobies [the priests] a brode in the world to get them wiues of their owne. . . ." More, author of the "gins and grins" above, is in fact not much ahead of Tyndale in his mastery of the low (i.e., popular) but effective blow: "Of what texte thou provest hell/ will a nother prove purgatory/ a nother lymbo patrum/ and a nother the assumcion of oure ladi: And a nother shall

prove of the same texte that an Ape hath a tayle." And again: "And thereby they haue stopte vpp the gates of heven/ the true knowlege of Christ/ and haue made their awne belies the dore. For thorow their belies must thou crepe and there leave all thy fall behynde the."⁷

Tyndale's ape (a popular figure at the time) appears in another guise in More. Of the anonymous author of one of the books More refuted he writes thus: ". . . I speke of the apperynge of the face in the glasse, and one face in euery pyece of the glasse broken into twenty: mayster Maskar [More's name for his adversary] hath caughte that glasse in hand and mocketh and moweth in that glasse, and maketh as many straunge faces and as many pretye pottes therin, as yt were an olde ryueled ape." More is also much inclined to use the terminology of popular medicine, as when he says of Master Masker: "I minyshe his borden of that odiousse cryme [of heresy]/ & bycause the mater in thys place so serueth me, do couer the boch of his cancred heresy, with this prety plaster of his pleasaunt frensie. . . . This lytell scabbe of his foly he laboreth somewhat to hyde and couer, so that a man muste pull of the clowte ere he can spye the boche." Again, of Luther: "both hym selfe & all his secte were fayne to seke some plasters of false gloses, to hele the foule marmole of theyr skabbed shynnys, that they hadde gotten by that texte of theyr false fayth alone."⁸

We may return to Tyndale and Fish for final examples of this trick of the homely phrase or the everyday metaphor that adds so much vigor to the lengthy treatises the polemicists wrote. Fish asks in his address to the King, "But whate remedy to releue vs your poore sike lame and sore bedemen? To make many hospitals for the relief of the poore people? Nay truly. The moo the worse, for euer the fatte of the hole foundation hangeth on the prestes berdes."⁹ Here is Tyn-

dale's: "Now the pope hath .x. thousand sectes copen in/ as pied in their consciences as in their cotes. . . ." ¹⁰

The technique that I want to discuss next is a specialty of More's, and may most properly be described as an extension or elaboration of the homely metaphor, sometimes sustained until it achieves the proportion of a scene of local color. Thus More will expatiate at length upon the figure of the "supper of the Lord" because it is taken as the name of a heretical book he wishes to refute:

For more blasphemouse, and more bedelem rype than this boke is, were that boke harde to be/ which is yet madde enough as men say that haue sene yt.

This boke is intytled, The souper of our lord. But I beshrew suche a shewer, as so serueth in the souper, that he conuayth away the best dyshe, and bryngeth yt not to the borde. . . .

But his handes are to lumpyshe and this messe also to great for hym to conuey clene. . . .

. . . He hathe with his own poysened cokery, made yt the souper of the deuyl. And yet wold the deuyl I wene dysdayne to haue his souper dressed of such a rude ruffyn, such a scald Colyn coke, as vnder the name of a clerke, so rybaldyously rayleth agaynst the blessed bodye of Chryste in the blessed sacrament of thauter. ¹¹

Again he extends the metaphor in a particularly delightful way: "... They that gladly wold endure a gryefe perpetually, to haue the pleasure of the continuall swagyng, haue in theyr beste welth but a dyspleasunt pleasure/ except men be so mad as to thynke that he were well at ease that myghte be euer a hungred & euer eatyng, euer a thirst & euer drynkyng, euer lowsy & euer clawing, euer skoruy & euer scratchyng." ¹²

Once more it must be said that Tyndale can do the same sort of thing, and often do it more smoothly and more sweetly than More could ever do. "Feare and dreade of rebuke and of losse of his fathers loue and of punishment

wrastell with the trust which he hath in his fathers goodnesse and as it were geue his faith a fall." This image of the wrestling takes us again to More and that stage of the metaphor which, as I have said, approaches almost to scene-painting. "Thus haue I good readers . . . geuen hym in his owne turne so many gret & fowle fallys, in euery part of his processe, that if this great clerke had so many so great fallys geuen hym at Clerkenwell at a wrestelynge, he wolde haue had I wene neyther rybbe, nor arme, nor legge lefte hym hole long ago, nor at thys laste lyste, his necke unbroken neither." The daily life of London's streets appears again in an extended portrait of the thimblerrigger: "Here is mayster Masker fall to iuglynge so/ and as a iugler layeth forth hys trynclettes vpon the table and byddeth men loke on this & loke on that and blowe in hys hande/ and than with certayne straunge wordes to make men muse/ whurleth his iuglynge stycke about his fyngers to make men loke vpon that/ whyle he playeth a false caste and conuayeth with the tother hand some thyng slyly into his purse or his sleue or some where out of syght. . . ."¹³

Although this kind of figure is, in More's hands, sometimes extended beyond need, and is nearly always rather frenetic in tone, yet it is implicitly representative of what is best in More's prose: his accurate eye for the London scene, and, more important for this essay, his sensitive ear for the cadences of London speech. One more example must suffice: ". . . Of all myne aduersaryes could I neuer hytherto fynde any one, but whan he catcheth ones a fall, as eche of theym hath caughte full many, there lyeth he styll tumblynge & toltrynge in myre, and neyther spurre nor brydyll can one ynche preuayle/ but as though they were not fallen in a puddle of dyrt, but rubbed & layed in lytter under the manger at theyre ease, they whyne & they byte, and they

kycke, and they spurne at hym that wolde helpe theym uppe."¹⁴

In Tyndale what may seem to be the same technique is usually aimed more directly at a target in human nature, which he observed more coolly and indeed more wisely than More ever could. "And the holidaye will he kepe so strayte that if he mete a flee in his bed he dare not kill hir/ and not once regarde wherfore the holidaye was ordained to seke for goddes worde. . . . He captiuateth his witte & vnderstondinge to obey holye church with out askinge what [sacraments and ceremonies] meane or desiringe to knowe but onlye careth for the kepinge and loketh ever with a payre of narrow yies and with all his spectacles vppon them/ lest ought belefte out. . . . He had leuer that the bisshope shuld wagge .ij. fingers ouer him/ then that a nother man shulde saye god saue him. . . ."¹⁵ It would seem that the antecedents of the character-book of the seventeenth century were not all Greek.

Both More and Tyndale indulged from time to time in mere English word-play. One of the most surprising examples is More's apparent play upon "fole" (i.e., "fool"), when he speaks (referring to Frith) of "thys yong mannes vayne chilysh folosophy." This is certainly not pure paronomasia; it is more like pure Ogden Nashery. A clearer case of word-play, though it is not really punning either, is another attack upon Frith: "And therfore thys poynt is as ye se well of thys yong man very yongely handeled. And therfore ought euery man abhorre as a playne pestylence, all such vnreasonable reasons made for nature by more than naturall folys, agaynst the possybylyte of goddes almyghty power."¹⁶ I should say that Tyndale makes use of exactly the same set of rules when he defends his translation of the New Testament against More's strictures. "And wyth lyke reasons [More]

rageth . . . because I turne charis in to fauoure and not in to grace/ sayenge that euery fauoure is not grace and that in some fauoure there is but little grace. I can saye also in some grace there is lytle goodnesse. And when we saye/ he stondeth well in my ladis grace/ we understonde no greate godly fauoure."¹⁷

Tyndale and More sometimes make the same kind of ordinary jokes, too, especially in the books they write against one another. In More's *Dialogue* against Tyndale, the following colloquy takes place between the author and his stooge:

Harde it wer quod I to finde any thing so playn that it should nede no glose at all.

In faith quod he thei make a glose to some textes, that be as plaine as it is, that twise two make four.

Why quod I, nedeth that no glose at al?

I trow so quod he. Or els the deuil is on it.

I wisse quod I, & yet though ye would beleue one that wold tell you, that twise two ganders made alway foure gese, yet ye would be aduised ere ye beleued hym, that woulde tell you that twise two gese made all waye foure ganders. For therein might ye be deceiued. And him would ye not beleue at al, that wold tel you, that twise two gese wold alwai make foure horse.¹⁸

Tyndale is more concise and to the point. "There is a nother question," he says, "whether the church maye erre. Which if ye vnderstonde of the pope and his generacion/ it is verely as hard a question as to axe/ whether he which hath both his eyes out be blynd or no/ or whether it be possible for him that hath one legge shorter than a nother to halt."¹⁹ More is likelier to come straight to the point when he is not making a joke for its own sake or for the sake of its lesson, but when he is being insulting in jocular tone. Two examples will show the distinction. Against the anonymous author of the "poysened booke," he quotes St. Paul, "'My prechyng was not among you in persuasyble wordes of mannes wyse-dome.'

"These wordes I saye not agaynst mayster Masker/ for he kepeth hym selfe sure inough for that poynt, and is ware well inough that he speke no persuasible wordes of mannes wysedome." Against Frith he writes, "I am in good fayth sory to se thys yong man presume so farre vpon his wytte, so soone ere it be full rype. For surely suche lykyng of theym selfe maketh many wyttes waxe roten ere they waxe rype. And verly if it do decreace and go backwarde in thys fasshyon, it maye not last longe."²⁰

Joke and insult added together lead almost inevitably to the logical conclusion of scurrility; and the controversy over the marriage of the clergy made admirable occasion for it. Simon Fish, it will be remembered, argued that the kingdom would take advantage from the increase in population that would ensue from the marriage of the clergy. But this drastic remedy is unnecessary, says More. ". . . Yf theyr abstayning from maryage not wythstandyng, the land hath bene vp-holden with the generacyon of you that ar the temporalte so long: ye shall lyke wyse hereafter be goddes grace and the helpe of good prayours for kepyng the land from wyldernes, be able to get chyldern styll your self, and shall not nede to call neyther monkys nor freres to helpe you."²¹ In another place More is discussing with the "messenger" (who serves as interlocutor in his dialogue) Tyndale's interpretation of Paul's instructions to Timothy about marriage with a widow. ". . . Tyndall woulde by this waye make saint Poule to say thus. Take . . . but such a wydowe, as hath hadde but one housbande at once, as though the gyse were in his dayes that wyues might haue two husbandes at once. In faith quod your frend I thynke saint Poule ment not so. For then had wiues bene in his tyme litle better than grasse widowes be now. For they bee yet as seuerall as a barbers chayre, and neuer take but one at once."²²

More looses his most scurrilous invective (with some justification, by modern standards) against the anonymity assumed by one of his controversial opponents. This writer cannot be shamed by the weakness or error of his arguments, says More, because he will not let his name be known. "Wherin he fareth myche lyke to some bestely body that wolde not care to sytte downe wyth hys face to the walwarde, and ease hym selfe in the open strete/ and though all the towne at onys tote in his tayle, take it for no shame at all, bycause they se not hys face."²³ The language is far from delicate, and yet it is thoroughly typical of its age, of its place, and of its author.

Professor Lewis says of More and Tyndale that "in scurrility they are about equals." I have not found them so. More is by far the earthier, as he is the more cockney; the reader is forced, even against his will, almost to wallow in the humanity of the man. Tyndale, on the contrary, is exalted by his mission and his vision, and his humor suffers therefor; but his prose is better. Both of them, I have tried to imply, left their mark on the language through the instruments they forged for the controversy. One can scarcely read a word of Nashe or Dekker without meeting the ghost of Sir Thomas More; the spirit of William Tyndale walks abroad in many a sermon of Donne. And it should not be taken merely as compliment to him in whose honor I write to suggest that John Milton was aware of every trick of the controversial trade known to More, Tyndale, and their colleagues and imitators, and improved upon most of them.

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NOTES

1. *The Rise of English Literary Prose* (New York, 1915), p. 10.
2. Quoted *ibid.*, pp. xi-xii.

3. See George Williamson, *The Senecan Amble* (London, 1951), pp. 62-67.
4. *A letter of syr Tho. More knyght impugnynge the erronyouse wrytyng of John Fryth. . . .* (London, 1533), sigs. a.iii, a.iv, and l.ii. (I have throughout the paper expanded the contractions in my sources.)
5. William Tyndale, *An answeare vnto Sir Thomas Mores dialogue. . . .* (1530), fols. v (verso) and xi (verso).
6. Fish, *A Supplicacyon for the Beggars* (1524?), fol. 6; Tyndale, *The obedience of a Christen man. . . .* (1528), fol. xiiij.
7. More, *The answeare to the fyrst parte of the poysened booke, whych a namelesse heretyke hath named the souper of the lorde* (London, 1534), fol. ccxvi (verso); Fish, *Supplicacyon*, fol. 8; Tyndale, *Obedience*, fol. xix; Tyndale, *An answeare*, fol. xxv.
8. *The answeare to the fyrst parte*, fols. cclviii and verso, cxliii and verso, and cxlii.
9. *Supplicacyon*, fol. 7v.
10. *An answeare*, fol. lxii (verso).
11. *The answeare to the fyrst parte*, sig. Aa.vii. and fol. cclxxvi (verso).
12. *Ibid.*, fol. xxiii.
13. Tyndale, *An answeare*, fol. xix (verso); More, *The answeare to the fyrst parte*, fols. ccxviii (verso), clx and verso.
14. *The answeare to the fyrst parte*, sig. N.iv (verso) and N.v.
15. *An answeare*, fol. iij (verso).
16. *A letter of syr Tho. More. . . .*, sigs. k.iv (verso), l, and i (verso).
17. *An answeare*, fol. xi (verso).
18. *The workes of Sir T. More, wrytten by him in the Englishe tonge* (London, 1557), p. 169.
19. *An answeare*, fol. xvj.
20. *The answeare to the fyrst parte*, fol. cxxxi (verso); *A letter*, sig. i.
21. *The supplycacyon of soulis* (London, 1529), fol. xvi.
22. *Workes*, p. 230. It will be noted that "grass widow" had a significance rather different from that it now bears; "several" is used in its legal sense, the reverse of "common."
23. *The answeare to the fyrst parte*, sig. Bb.vi (verso).